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## John Podesta Leads Obama's Transition Team With His Usual Energy

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To fully understand how John Podesta is managing the complex Democratic takeover of the federal government, you have to be familiar with Skippy, the evil twin.

Anyone who has worked for Podesta in the past decade knows Skippy, who first appeared during Podesta's eventful years as chief of staff in the Clinton White House. As scandal rocked the end of that presidency, staffers knew they had better come prepared to meetings. Otherwise, nurturing mentor John would be replaced by Skippy -- Podesta's quick-tempered, edgy and sarcastic alter ego.

"You haven't seen him in this meeting, have you?" the transition co-chairman for Barack Obama says with a laugh, noting that many a reporter has met Skippy.

"I'm half Greek and half Italian, and you would expect that I would have a hot temper," he says in an interview at the downtown transition office, where the tightly wound, wiry operative is building a government. "I like people to perform at a high level." He likens his operating style to a loud, ethnic family dinner. "Sometimes our emotions get expressed, but we all love each other and we all are trying to help each other succeed."

That sentiment is pretty much echoed by those who have worked with and for Podesta over his three decades in Washington -- most of whom are now lining up for jobs. "Let's say my in-box is filled," he says with a wide grin.

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So far, nearly 300,000 job seekers have filed résumés online for about 8,000 jobs. During a recent visit to the transition office, the building's lobby looked like the Palm at lunchtime: a lot of hungry-looking men (and a few women) in dark suits staring at BlackBerrys, waiting to meet with someone, anyone.

Upstairs, a surreal calm infused the offices on Sixth Street NW, where Podesta shuttles between conference rooms and juggles a president-elect sitting in Chicago; heavy hitters like New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who flew to Washington to offer help; and, once again, the high-maintenance Clintons, now that Hillary has come into play for secretary of state.

Podesta is, by most accounts, the right guy for the job. Skippy aside, his admirers say he doesn't rattle easily, is an honest broker and is intensely loyal. Podesta is also one of the rare Beltway animals who is both a wonk and a skilled politician and communicator. "He's in politics for the right reasons," says Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, a former boss. "He's a believer."

And unlike most politicians, he is serious while not taking himself too seriously: At 59, he's a UFO aficionado, a marathon runner and a roller-coaster devotee. "My wife and I like to get the senior-citizen passes, wait in line for the front car and then hold hands in the air like the teenagers," he says.

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John Podesta, left, at the White House earlier this month with President Bush's chief of staff, Josh Bolten. (By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

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There is always a manic crush of job seekers during a transition, but Podesta says he has never seen anything quite like the eagerness to join the Obama administration. "This is really quite special. I think this is an extension of the campaign. If you think about the people he brought into the campaign, whether as volunteers or new contributors, the space he created on the Net for them to organize, the movement and the change, these people are excited and want to be part of it. . . . I think the sense of service is very strong out in the country."

Obama asked Podesta last summer to lead the transition after Sen. Hillary Clinton withdrew from the race, but long before Obama was elected president. It's common for transition preparations to start for both sides before the election -- although there is every indication that Podesta's team was far more active than John McCain's operation. Podesta first went back and studied the pitfalls of previous transitions. "The one basic take-away that a lot of people commented on, including the president [Bill Clinton], is that Clinton really concentrated on building his Cabinet early on, to the neglect of building his White House structure," he says. "The early pick of Rahm [Emanuel] reflects the lesson of that experience, which is that you need to begin to build a structure for the White House."

The plan, he says, counts on the transition team to staff only the senior levels of the White House, Cabinet members and the top layer at government agencies. With specially created software to collate the applicants by expertise, the transition office is building a database, he says, that will easily transfer to the White House personnel office. Podesta says that as soon as the appointees can transition out of their current jobs and take responsibility, he will hand off the rest of the hiring to them. "Much of the hiring," he says, "will take place after the inauguration."

In addition to personnel, the transition has dispatched teams of Democrats to conduct efficiency studies of the various agencies, as well as review the current system for awarding contracts. "There's a lot of sole sourcing of contracts in the Bush structure that even infected the grantmaking process," he says. "There's a lot to clean out of the barn there."

Since leaving the White House in 2001, Podesta has built what some have referred to as a skilled government-in-waiting through his think tank, the Center for American Progress. With private funding, its mission from the outset was to develop an intellectual reservoir of Democrats to counter the growing conservative establishment during George W. Bush's presidency. If anything, Podesta -- a left-of-center guy -- set out to show there was no such thing as the "permanent Republican majority" that Bush adviser Karl Rove hoped to leave as his legacy. "They didn't do so good," Podesta quips.

But though others might call him a committed liberal, Podesta prefers to see himself as a progressive. "There's some distinction between classic liberalism and the progressive project that went back to the early 20th century -- progressive social reformers in both parties were interested in results and started movements [such as those] against exploitation of workers," says Podesta, who recently published a book on the subject, "The Power of Progress."

". . . They kind of blended together under Roosevelt. People call me liberal and I say call me what you want. There is a strong-rooted context for progressive politics in this country, and I think Senator Obama embodies that. He ran on a platform that was progressive in sensibility . . . focusing on common good, offering a sense of hope and direction, what I would characterize as strongly progressive in its nature."

Podesta grew up in blue-collar northwest Chicago. His father dropped out of high school after a year to help support his family and worked in factories his entire life. Podesta writes in "The Power of Progress" that he was able to attend Knox College and Georgetown Law School by working nights and receiving federal loans and scholarships. His well-traveled Washington career took him from the Justice Department to Capitol Hill to, eventually, the Clinton White House, where he was the "staff secretary" -- and where he became the go-to guy to manage every scandal.

His first was the travel office fiasco at the beginning of the Clinton presidency, during which he wrote an internal report that did not spare the first lady, and which established him as fearless. He left for a few years, came back during Clinton's second term, and was quickly elevated to chief of staff. But that action-packed experience was apparently enough to last a lifetime. Podesta says emphatically that he will not be joining the Obama administration.